DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 240 CE 080 715

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TITLE FutureWorks: An Alternative Avenue to Success. Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series.
INSTITUTION Arlington Public Schools, VA. Virginia Adult Education Research Network.
SPONS AGENCY Virginia Association of Adult and Continuing Education, Charlottesville.
PUB DATE 2000-08-00
NOTE 6p.; For related documents, see: ED 435 207 and CE 080 713-720.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/Elizabeth_Cochran.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Adolescents; Adult Basic Education; *Adult Learning; *At Risk Persons; Classroom Research; Classroom Techniques; Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Attitudes; Educational Environment; Educational Objectives; Educational Practices; Focus Groups; *High School Equivalency Programs; Individualized Instruction; Nontraditional Education; *School Holding Power; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Researchers; Teacher Student Relationship; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS General Educational Development Tests; Virginia; 353 Project

ABSTRACT

A teacher who teaches General Educational Development preparation to at-risk teenagers in a nonprofit alternative education program called FutureWorks conducted a study to identify those elements of FutureWorks that keep students coming to the program. The study included the following data collection activities: a consensus-building activity to identify what students considered most and least important about FutureWorks; an essay about students' backgrounds, goals, and views regarding FutureWorks' quality; and a focus group attended by five female students aged 18 to 20 years old. The factors that kept students coming to FutureWorks fell into the following three categories: (1) respect for individual needs (students can choose their own work and collaborate with the teacher to create individualized lesson plans); (2) supportive climate (the classroom's climate is informal, the program features an off-campus location and shorter-than-normal hours, and teacher patronage and advocacy are central to the program); and (3) alternative opportunities (FutureWorks gives students opportunities to accomplish their goals by traveling an alternative path, and it is designed to make students feel valued and respected). Students requested that more enrichment materials be included in FutureWorks. Students discounted many elements of FutureWorks that the instructor thought would be important (for example, no dress code) (MN)

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

FutureWorks: An Alternative Avenue to Success

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Background

I teach GED preparation to teenagers who are at-risk. It brings me the joy of discovery and lifelong learning. Each young adult student, generally sixteen to eighteen years old, has a unique story about why he or she has arrived at FutureWorks, the nonprofit alternative education program where I teach. FutureWorks is a small somewhat obscure yet strangely successful program. We operate from a small Episcopalian church in Montgomery County, Virginia. We recruit and accept students who have, for the most part, failed in other alternative education programs or one of the four high schools in the county. Students who attend FutureWorks are at-risk of, or presently experiencing, some of life's most distressing experiences: drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, physical and emotional abuse, pregnancy, and school expulsion. My aide, Ann Winters, and I teach ten students at a time. Our class consists mostly of white young women, with no consistency regarding family education or socioeconomic condition. About half of our students have chronic physical or emotional health problems; some are learning disabled and many are involved with the juvenile justice system. While we are equally open to boys, every year the girls are most successful in completing their goals. We have struggled to understand what works for our students but in a haphazard informal manner. Therefore, when it became possible to carry out research about our program's effectiveness, I seized the opportunity.

Inquiry

From the students' perspective, what are the elements of the program or of the teaching practices that keeps them coming to FutureWorks?

Action

I had been informally collecting data on this subject for several years through students' assessment of the program. Although these are revealing, I decided to more systematically collect data, focusing on the specific information in which I was interested. Better to understand why FutureWorks functions well, I wanted to examine the data for patterns and themes in the students' responses.

Data Collection

I informed my students of the purpose of the research — to explore from their perspective what makes FutureWorks work — and that I needed their participation. We held a consensus building activity in class that answered what was most important and what was least important. In addition, I asked them to address, in essay form, why they came, what they learned about themselves, what they liked and what they disliked about the program, and what changes or improvements could be made.

Next, I held a focus group that was attended by five female students between 18 and 20 years old; one young mother attended with her newest infant. We provided dinner and during the meeting, which lasted for about three hours, we engaged in three activities that I tape-recorded for later transcription. First, the warm up activity was to arrange program elements written on index-cards into their order of importance. Ann and I had chosen seven elements that we felt made FutureWorks different from traditional high school: flexibility with work schedules, choice in own daily work, informal atmosphere and meeting place, guest speakers, outdoor classroom, community building activities, and no dress code. Second, we asked each person to list three reasons they liked attending, three reasons they did not like attending, and three things they would change about the program. We discussed these sentiments and displayed them

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on a flip chart with close attention being paid to any item that appeared on more than one list. Third, we held a round table discussion and posed the following questions, allowing time for group discussion of each question: What makes FutureWorks different from the public school experience? What makes it easy to attend? What makes it hard to attend? What are the things that keep you interested? What would make FutureWorks more interesting?

Findings

Ann and I concluded that the findings fell into three separate categories: Respect for Individual Needs, Supportive Climate, and Alternative Opportunities.

Respect for individual needs

Students' appreciate the ability to choose their own work and collaborate with the teacher to create an individual lesson plan. As one former student pointed out, "You don't have to learn what you already know. You pick your own subjects and learn them at you own speed. You take the practice test when you feel you are ready." Flexibility in individual learning paths is tied, in part, to the program's tenets. One GED graduate who now has a 3.8 grade average in college reported, "The flexibility not only of the schedule, but the whole flexibility of the program [was a plus] and you, especially in my case, were very flexible with me showing up and the work that I would do." Wrote a current student, "You really worked with me. Here I get the attention I need and learn at my pace, not everyone else's."

For some students the climate of a small classroom is enhanced by individualized instruction. One student wrote that "If you had a problem or something then, you know, you or Ann were right there to help us instead of having to hold our hand up and wait all day or not getting our questions answered." For others, a small class signifies a calmer environment for better learning and better behavior. "[I liked not having] as many people to deal with," one student reported.

The shorter week (Tuesday - Thursday) and school day (11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.) correspond with the fact that most FutureWorks students hold down full or part-time jobs. They may have children or other adult responsibilities. We adapt to their transportation difficulties, chronic mental and physical illnesses, court dates, etc. We take care to accommodate individuals' work schedules and child-care needs. FutureWorks doctrine is to believe rather than question student requests. "You worked around the fact that I had a child...when I had doctors' appointments and stuff," said the young mother passing her second child to another participant. "You were real understanding when I couldn't get out because I lived on a stupid road, when the weather was bad, I mean you could make it and we couldn't," remarked a young woman whose living conditions had prevented regular attendance. A student who worked at a fast food chain observed, "You were understanding, like when I needed to leave early because stuff would happen [at work]."

Supportive climate

The climate of the classroom is informal. We are more concerned with addressing student comfort level and learning requirements than we are in getting students to conform to rigorous rules and procedures. The climate or atmosphere is greatly influenced by the attitude of the teachers. "As the teacher, so the class," the old maxim goes. Students report that the relaxed atmosphere at FutureWorks is conducive to learning how to build caring and trusting relationships with peers and teachers.

Students described how the off-campus location and shorter hours were conducive to learning. One student who had attendance problems in high school said, "Instead of going to school all day, I feel like I learned just as much in three hours of going to school [at FutureWorks]." The ability to physically move away from the other students was also mentioned. "I need my solitude to learn," said a student now attending college. Another student who had frequently been in fights at high school said, "Freedom of movement. You could sort of come and go. You could go outside and take breaks."

Teacher patronage and advocacy also play a big part in the success of some students. When asked what motivated them to continue to come to class, most of the participants surveyed said it was the teachers. When asked why, a student responded, "Because you wanted to give the kids a chance. You were willing to let them change. You gave us a chance." Another said, "You provided a level playing field where you were not labeled." A current student wrote, "I also like that here the teacher and people take the time to help you no matter what it is." Twice, during the focus group, past

FutureWorks students interrupted the syllabus to inquire about the welfare of absent classmates.

In contrast to previous experiences in the public school system, students are comfortable and relaxed learning at FutureWorks. One former student wrote, "FutureWorks was a place where there was an openness and there was an acceptance...It came at a time where i worked with exactly what I needed. Maybe it was because it's a smaller environment. The high school is a big place." Teachers that are open to forming friendly relationships made the difference for another who wrote, "The teachers and students could form a good friendship while they were working." Another student expressed her attitude toward the differences in treatment, " You could laugh and joke and pick around with everybody. It wasn't so, like, serious like regular school was." In brief, "It was fun...it was just a place to get away and everybody was friends," as a young mother pointed out.

Climate, when it is safe and supportive can successfully provide personal growth opportunities. In this climate, attention is paid to group dynamics and empathetic behavior is encouraged. According to one student, personal growth is most fostered by, "[Rating] our moods in the morning. Like just being able to talk and tell each other how we felt. " Another said it was, "Getting a response to my journal. I liked that. I have become more responsible, more self confident, and I have opened up more." A student who was incarcerated during the school year wrote, "[I learned] things won't stay bad for long. I value (learning) how to deal with life and all the obstacles there are. This class has helped me realize how important and lucky I am."

Alternative opportunities

Opportunity to accomplish their goals by traveling an alternative path is very important to FutureWorks participants, and they are grateful that an alternative route to success exists. It is a paradox that the very system they blame for their failures is the same one that provides them with an alternative. "Not everyone is offered a second chance at completing their high school diploma. This is a Godsend for those that can't handle the Montgomery County School System," said one student. Another shared, "I really appreciated having an alternative rather than just being a high school drop out. That motivated me to come a lot."

They also expressed that they did not feel valued or respected before they came to the FutureWorks Program. Student perceptions about their treatment at FutureWorks compared with their perceived treatment in other schools lead to persistence finishing the program and motivation to pass the GED examination.

Many past and present students interviewed felt as if they needed to prove to the establishment, their friends, and their families that they could be successful. As one student who sees herself as self-determined explained, "I really wanted to prove to the Montgomery County School System that they were way off!" A student who took two high school certificate classes while studying for her GED at FutureWorks related, "I mean that's something to prove that, you know, I did further my education. I mean, that's the reason why I kept coming."

Implications and Future Directions

One unexpected thing I learned through my research was that my students want more enrichment materials included in the FutureWorks program. Although they may be academically prepared to take the GED examination, my students must often wait until they can meet the official requirements, age requirements, for instance. They asked that I provide more enrichment materials to help then in career planning, job search, life skills and college preparation while they wait to take the test. I plan to implement this request in the coming school year.

Many elements of the program that I believed would be most cherished by the participants, like no dress code and the opportunity to work outside, were totally discounted by the students. What they really appreciated was the opportunity to pursue an equivalent to their high school diploma and the personal accommodations in scheduling and teaching. I was astounded that what really concerned them was getting an education, not a way to avoid school. And so, what I learned is that it is their mature attitude toward learning that motivates them to come to class and study for their GED certificate. It is not the desire to get away from learning nor is it the avoidance of established rules. These young adults want to be successful. They are just unable, for various reasons, to keep to the traditional path. What FutureWorks offers is a more

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comfortable alternative avenue to success. ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Practitioner Research Briefs were published by the Virginia Adults Education Research Network, a project operated from the Arlington Education and Employment Program, within the Department of Adult, Career, and Vocational Education in the Arlington Public Schools. The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems in their own practice. Through the brief reports they write practitioner researchers contribute to both theory and practice in the adult education and literacy field.

This project was funded under Section 353 of the Adult Education Act, Title VI, P. 93-380 and amendments through the Adult Education Service, Department of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia with additional funding from the Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education. Cassandra Drennon and Ronna Spacone edited the 1999-2000 Report Series. The perspective expressed through each Practitioner Research Brief is that of the researcher and author. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs is available on the Internet at: <http://www.vcu.edu/aeluweb/vaern.html>.

Published August 2000

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